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5-10-2022

**Rejecting Deconstruction and Welcoming Christian Mysticism: A
Review of When Everything's on Fire**

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Rejecting Deconstruction and Welcoming Christian Mysticism: A Review of When Everything's on Fire

Abstract

"This book is an invitation for us to recall and experience the history and tradition of the church that extends far back beyond the modern age."

Posting about the book *When Everything's on Fire* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/rejecting-deconstruction-and-welcoming-christian-mysticism-a-review-of-when-everythings-on-fire-faith-forged-from-the-ashes/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, When Everything's on Fire, faith, forged, ashes, Brian Zahnd

Disciplines

Christianity

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In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

Rejecting Deconstruction and Welcoming Christian Mysticism: A Review of *When Everything's on Fire*

Dave Mulder

May 10, 2022

Title: When Everything's on Fire: Faith Forged from the Ashes

Author: Brian Zahnd

Publisher: IVP

Publishing Date: November 9, 2021

Pages: 192 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1514003336

It seems to me that in the past couple of years, everyone in the evangelical world is talking about “deconstruction”. I hear about deconstruction on popular Christian podcasts, in reports from Christian news organizations, and from Christian thought leaders and personalities in their tweets and social media posts. Some are decrying deconstruction as theological liberalism infecting the church and turning people away from an authentic faith in Jesus. Others are celebrating deconstruction as a way of *reinvigorating* the church. Some seem to think that deconstruction is just a normal part of contemporary Christian faith practices; a response to the cultural, political, and public health madness of the past few years. Others seem to be applying the label of deconstruction as a dog whistle to signal political liberalism among Evangelicals. Still others use deconstruction to mean abandoning Christianity entirely. And some—like me—have been trying to see things with some nuance, recognizing that different people are using the word “deconstruction” to mean very different things. Perhaps this is why I found Brian Zahnd’s book *When Everything’s on Fire: Faith Forged from the Ashes* to be so meaningful for speaking to the current cultural moment.

Brian Zahnd

Zahnd serves as pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri, and has authored several books about following the way of Jesus. *When Everything’s on Fire* is written with a pastor’s heart, and a prophetic message, and a poetic voice. Zahnd clearly loves Jesus, cares for the church, and writes to encourage and inspire. His purpose for the writing of this book is straightforward: “I have a simple mission statement: to help make Christianity possible for my grandchildren and their generation”¹.

As the title of the book might suggest, Zahnd does not shy away from describing the brokenness he sees all around. In the opening of the book, he describes how he began outlining the book in late 2019, and how the book suddenly seemed even more timely at the beginning of 2020:

Everything was on fire! A global pandemic. An economic crisis. A day of reckoning for America's systemic racial injustice. Nationwide protests. More police shootings of unarmed Black men. More unrest. More scandals in the church. More politicization of the Christian faith. More political vitriol and violence. More enflamed division. More people losing faith. Indeed, everything's on fire!²

Perhaps it's no wonder, in such a world, that many people—even Christians—have found their foundational beliefs shaken. And perhaps it's no wonder that many long-time church members have begun to re-examine their faith in new ways.

Zahnd begins chapter one by positing, "Once upon a time, we all believed in God"³. Here he lays out his premise: in the developments of the modern world as we've shifted into a postmodern culture, Christianity's cultural dominance has declined. He points out that the fastest-growing religious category in the United States today is "none." Perhaps this is part of the cultural narrative that leads some to think that deconstruction is leading to people walking away from organized religion. But Zahnd is not so quick to make that jump, and instead invites us to wander through some historical and philosophical exploration that has led us to the present situation in the church. With evocative chapter titles such as "Deconstructing Deconstruction," "The Day Derrida Died," "The Dark Night of Unknowing," and "All Alone Upstairs," the first section of the book draws from the work of diverse philosophers and writers such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Barth, Descartes, Pascal, and C. S. Lewis. But this is not a treatise in philosophy; Zahnd warmly and pastorally charts a course through modernity that helps us understand that the seemingly oh-so-contemporary movement of "deconstruction" has developed over hundreds of years in the church.

Zahnd pushes forward on the contemporary discourse around "deconstruction." At one point, he suggests that deconstruction "seems to be a methodology that has no real endgame. At times, it feels like an invitation to endless cynicism. If as Christians, all we do is deconstruct, we eventually wind up in a world without any more Easters. And a world without Easter is a world without hope—a world on the precipice of nihilism"⁴. That said, Zahnd is very sympathetic to the impulse of rethinking and adjusting course throughout our respective faith journeys. In this, he is providing nuance to the idea of "deconstruction" as some would use it. He asks readers to consider what is at the center of their faith: their theology? The Bible? The church? The very person of Jesus Christ? If Christ remains at the center of the Christian faith, perhaps it makes sense that as we grow and mature in our faith, the expression of our hope in Christ might continue to develop?

To help us understand this development of our faith life and contrast it with the abandonment of faith that is commonly named “deconstruction” today, Zahnd uses an analogy that I found useful and helpful: if it’s true that Jesus himself is the center of faith, we build a “theological house” as a palace for King Jesus. Parts of our theological house are passed on to us, and other parts we construct ourselves as we follow and worship Jesus. But occasionally, we look around the theological house we have constructed for Jesus, recognizing that He is *not* the house, and realize that some renovations might be in order. King Jesus remains on the throne, but the remodeling of our theological house can be a restoration project. Zahnd describes his own “remodeling process” that he went through during his middle aged years:

... Some of the rooms in my theological house were largely untouched. Some rooms were only slightly remodeled. But some rooms were too dilapidated to be salvaged—they had to be torn down. A fresh coat of paint would not do, instead the sledgehammer was brought in. I embarked on the massive remodel of my theological house when I reached the point where I had no other choice. I believed in Jesus, but in midlife I became aware of how much of my theology was incongruent with the one who was the true object of my faith. I was willing to sacrifice my theology for my Lord. (p. 48)

Through several chapters, Zahnd explains how this sort of restoration (not “deconstruction”) is in fact essential work for continued spiritual growth. He encourages readers to welcome ancient traditions and spiritual disciplines that help to renovate and reinvigorate our faith life. As Zahnd puts it, “wisdom (especially moral and spiritual wisdom) is passed on from generation to generation. To reject all tradition *simply because it is tradition* is juvenile folly”⁵.

In the light of admonition to exploring ancient Christian practices, the final section of the book is an encouragement for contemporary Christ-followers to embrace Christian mysticism. I confess, this sounded strange to me at first. But as I continued reading and reflecting, I realized just how much of my own view of my faith life is still perceived through a modernist, intellectual lens. Is this endemic in Reformed expressions of Christianity, in which I’ve been so steeped?

Zahnd says, “Religion that resides solely in the intellect is incapable of sustaining faith in our disenchanted age. In a secular epoch, the Christian will either be a mystic or nothing at all”⁶. Perhaps this language of mysticism rubs you the wrong way at first, as it did me.? Zahnd’s encouragement is to think of Christian mysticism as *experiencing* God, rather than just *knowing about* God. He gives thoughtful examples from throughout scripture and from church history of people whose lives were fundamentally shifted by their experience of coming into contact with God himself. Abraham. Jacob. Moses. Elijah. Mary. Peter. Paul. Francis of Assisi. Julian of Norwich. John of the Cross. Thomas Merton. And maybe you as well. Perhaps we’ve made faith too intellectual, and not experiential enough in the Reformed tradition. This book is an invitation for us to recall and experience the history and tradition of the church that extends far back beyond the modern age. Zahnd is welcoming us to embrace mystery and wonder at the person of Jesus Christ.

If you find yourself on the margins of the church as a contemporary or former believer, or faith-adjacent, or your faith is just hanging on by a thread, *When Everything's on Fire* may provide some needed clarity or encouragement. If you are a believer in Jesus who has such a person in your life, you may understand and empathize with that journey of “deconstruction” that your loved one may be experiencing by reading this book. And you, like me, might find your own faith life reinvigorated in the process of reading, challenged to encounter Jesus in new-old ways by welcoming a sense of Christian mysticism into personal spiritual practices.

In the end, this is the real question towards which Zahnd is encouraging us: Who is Jesus to you? When it feels like everything is on fire, is it that the world is burning down around you, burning down your faith in Jesus? Or is the fire perhaps more like the mystical flame of Moses's encounter with the burning bush—a fire of revelation that refines and reforms your belief structure because you have had a real encounter with the Lord? Perhaps we need this opportunity and encouragement into restoration of our own faith life by re-encountering Jesus in the middle of a world that feels like it's all on fire.

1. p. 29

2. p. 9

3. p. 13

4. p. 33

5. p. 113

6. p. 126